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ABSTRACT

The nation's attention must be focused on the growing risk to its teenagers of contracting AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). As part of this effort, the Center for Population Options (CPO) organized a teen AIDS prevention project in Washington, D.C., based on information obtained from four focus groups comprised of 8-12 teens each. The focus groups provided the CPO with information on innercity teens' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to AIDS and its transmission. As a result of this information, the CPO developed both an AIDS prevention advertisement to distribute among D.C.'s innercity schools and a peer-mediated AIDS awareness test project. The project trained 24 Black and Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students in two of the district's innercity schools. After the students were educated about AIDS--the methods of its transmission and prevention--they organized school activities aimed at heightening AIDS awareness among fellow students. The CPO intends to develop both projects into a model program to be implemented in additional area schools, as well as to pilot test and adapt the program for replication in other communities. (KM)

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Teens for AIDS Prevention
Washington D.C. Demonstration Project
Program Summary

July, 1988

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Program Summary

Introduction

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is now an epidemic in the United States, and all sectors of society are affected. As of June 1, 1988, over 64,000 cases of AIDS have been reported to the Centers for Disease Control, and over 34,000 Americans have died of the disease. Adolescents currently account for less than one percent of the reported cases of AIDS. Yet, many leading public health professionals believe that teenagers will be the next high risk group for contracting the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. In fact, the U.S. Army has already found high rates of HIV infection among young people applying for the military, especially among minority young adults. In the Washington metropolitan area, one in 100 young recruits have tested positive for HIV infection. Furthermore, because of the long period of incubation for the virus, many of the people who are now ill with AIDS were probably infected during their teenage years.

The Center for Population Options (CPO) has been in the forefront of focusing attention on the growing risk of AIDS to American teenagers. As part of these efforts, CPO organized the Teens for AIDS Prevention Project (TAP) which has two principal goals. The first goal is to understand inner city teenagers' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior related to AIDS in order to help educators, health professionals, government officials, and the media design effective AIDS prevention strategies. In order to meet this goal, CPO conducted focus group research on teens attitudes, knowledge and behavior related to AIDS and developed an AIDS prevention advertisement directed at teens. The second goal is to develop and evaluate a peer-mediated approach to AIDS prevention that will work to change teen norms related to sex and drugs as well as other AIDS-related attitudes and behaviors. CPO tested the "Teens for AIDS Prevention" peer program in two schools and found the program successful.

Summary

A. Focus Group Research

CPO conducted four focus groups of inner-city teenagers to assess adolescents' awareness of and attitudes about AIDS. The objective of this research was to develop a greater understanding of what inner-city young people know about AIDS, how their behavior might have changed and what factors might influence them to take precautions. Most research to date has examined middle-class adolescents' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to

AIDS. The information from the focus group report brought valuable insight and the necessary background information for the development of an AIDS training program, which comprised a key building block of the Teens for AIDS Prevention project.

A focus group, a qualitative research methodology, is a small group discussion with 8 to 12 representatives of a selected target audience for a particular service, product, or idea. Participants are encouraged to relate to each other, share attitudes, and provide candid opinions regarding the topics presented to them by the moderator or generated by the dynamics of the group. The focus group research, in addition, provides in-depth information as opposed to simple, quantitative information which can be gathered through other research methods.

Several key findings emerged from the focus groups.

* The participants were generally well-informed about AIDS and how the HIV virus is transmitted.

* However, the teenagers did not feel that they were at risk of being exposed to the HIV virus and consequently did not change their behavior to avoid infection.

* The teens knew how to prevent infection but they did not fully accept any prevention methods. For example, total abstinence was universally rejected. Monogamy in a relationship was not seen as a favorable prevention option, especially among the males.

* Condoms were familiar to participants, and were recognized an acceptable means of protection but condoms also received some negative reactions. For instance, one participant stated that someone who uses condoms is believed to have a disease. This makes it very difficult to suggest the use of condoms in a relationship.

* Overall, participants wanted to learn more about AIDS and felt that their peers as well as young people with AIDS would be the most effective educators. (See attachment for full report.)

CPO applied the knowledge gained from the focus group research to the AIDS prevention advertisement and to the major activity itself, the peer-mediated program. The research findings suggested that the TAP programs and the advertisement needed to demonstrate to teens their vulnerability to HIV and to emphasize prevention methods that teens could find acceptable, such as condom use. One of the greatest challenges identified in the focus group report was how to teach students to discuss condom use with their partners given that the suggestion to use condoms often was believed to foster distrust in a relationship.

B. AIDS Prevention Advertisement

In an effort to educate adolescents about AIDS and to influence the messages teens are exposed to in the school environment, CPO worked closely with the public relations/ advertising firm Naab and Roser on an AIDS prevention advertisement to be placed in D.C. high school newspapers. The information gathered from the focus group report was used in the message developed for the advertisement. The advertisement combines an effective educational message for adolescents regarding their vulnerability to AIDS and gives them a resource for where to get more information.

The advertisement was used as a poster and placed in the halls of Wilson and Ballou high schools. In spite of the irregular schedule of some school newspaper production, and the timing of when the advertisement was developed, in two schools, Eastern and McKinley, the newspapers ran the advertisement this spring. McKinley and Eastern newspaper coordinators were very positive about the advertisement and would like to run it again in the fall. CPO intends to contact all D.C. high school newspapers in the fall of 1988 in order to arrange placement of the advertisement. (See attachment for the advertisement.)

C. "Teens for AIDS Prevention" Program, Pilot Phase

Like teenage pregnancy, AIDS is first a social problem, and simply providing young people with facts is not enough. Teenagers need the opportunity to clarify their values, practice decision-making and communication skills, and learn to resist peer pressure related to sex and drug use.

Health education efforts that try to change individual behavior by teaching facts without teaching skills often have not been successful in changing behaviors. Many of the most promising health education interventions with teenagers have been those that are coordinated by teenagers themselves and deal with changing teenage behavioral norms. Peer-mediated approaches to resisting cigarette and marijuana smoking and students against drinking and driving campaigns have all affected behavior, in ways that other interventions, such as drug lectures, cannot.

The TAP program works to change the school environment. Classrooms that teach "just say no" offer advice that conflicts with what teens learn in the halls and locker rooms where students hear that "everybody is doing it." Faced with this contradiction, teens practice "cognitive repression" -- they accept only one message and do what makes them most socially acceptable. The TAP program was designed to link the messages teens hear in the classroom and in the hall so that teens would consistently hear one message.

CPO tested the Teens for AIDS Prevention Program at Ballou and Wilson high schools, both of which are located in the District of Columbia. Each school picked twelve students and a faculty advisor for the "Teens for AIDS Prevention" group. The Ballou TAP group was comprised of black, low-income, inner-city youths, and Wilson of Hispanic, black and white inner-city youths. Both groups were comprised of students of all ages with a minimum of a C grade point average. From March through April, the students were provided extensive AIDS training from CPO staff, which gave them information and skills to protect themselves from HIV. A person with AIDS (PWA) talked with students about what it is like to live with AIDS. The students received the PWA very well, and for some, meeting the young person with AIDS greatly increased their commitment to the project. Wilson students invited the PWA to return and speak to a larger group of students.

After the students were trained, they began to develop activities designed to influence the school environment. Students were encouraged to think about who they wanted to reach, what was the best method to reach them, and what message to communicate. The students worked in groups and individually depending upon their interest and the activity.

In May, the students successfully began activities to educate fellow students in their schools. At Wilson High School, the activities included an AIDS Information Bulletin Board, which posted current newspaper and magazine articles collected by the students, a theatrical performance on AIDS written and produced by students along with a presentation by a person with AIDS to 500 9th and 10th graders. Several students designed posters which were put in visible locations around the schools. Five hundred pamphlets, 300 buttons, and 500 stickers were dispersed in the school. The buttons and stickers were thought to be effective by the TAP members because the students were often stopped in the hall to explain where the buttons came from and why they were interested in AIDS.

Ballou Senior High School also held an assembly for 400 9th and 10th graders. These students wrote and performed several "rap" songs and skits on AIDS and teenage pregnancy. In addition, several students held informal AIDS discussion groups for approximately 30 students. Eight hundred pamphlets, 300 buttons, and 500 stickers were dispersed in the school as done at Wilson High School. Again, the students felt that the buttons and stickers were useful in engaging other students in discussions about AIDS.

D. Evaluation

In March a control group was formed at both Wilson and Ballou high schools. Each control group included 12 students of similar age and race as the TAP group; these students did not receive AIDS training nor participate in any activities. Thus, comparisons between the TAP and control group could measure any changes caused by the TAP program. In order to assess any change in the TAP students' knowledge, attitude, and behavior related to AIDS the two TAP and two control groups were given a pre- and post-test. The pre- and post-tests ask questions related to students' knowledge about AIDS including its transmission and means of protection from being infected, attitudes towards people with AIDS, and questions exploring whether students have changed their behavior because of AIDS. The tests results showed that students' previously held misinformation was corrected during the program. For instance, at the pre-test, 21 percent of the TAP members believed that mosquitoes infected people with HIV, but none believed that at the post-test. There was no change in knowledge among the control group. A small change in behavior among TAP members also resulted from the training during the project. At the post-test, there was a twenty-one percent increase in students who had started to practice safer sex because of AIDS. This change in numbers, however, is not statistically significant.

Long-term Plans

CPO intends to develop TAP into a model program to be implemented in additional D.C. high schools as well as schools and youth serving agencies nationwide. CPO will pick two to four sites for pilot-testing the materials and program as a national model in the fall of 1989. By pilot-testing the program in different communities, CPO will learn what adaptations need to be made for successful and easy replication of the TAP project in various locations in the United States. Also, following the production of the model program materials in 1988, they will be tested at different project sites in fall of 1989 and then refined for the final TAP program package. The Teens for AIDS Prevention program will reach thousands of teens, reducing their risk of infection from the HIV virus, and will serve as a tested approach for other youth-oriented groups to use and implement.

If you're old enough to have sex, you're old enough to get AIDS.

Like most teenagers, we used to think AIDS was just an adult problem. But the fact is, if we're having sex, we can become infected with the virus that causes AIDS.

Today, more than one in five people with AIDS are in their twenties. Because of the long latency period for the virus, many of these people probably were infected as teenagers.

It doesn't matter if you're straight or gay. AIDS can be spread through any kind of sexual intercourse. Also, people who do drugs can get AIDS by sharing needles.

So what can you do to prevent AIDS? Waiting to have sex is your best protection. If you *are* having sex, use a condom, each and every time. Don't experiment with drugs and *never* share any kind of needle.

Now that we're old enough to get AIDS, we're old enough to do something to prevent it.

Today's most important fact of life is you <u>can</u> protect yourself.

If you have questions, call for confidential answers.

D.C. AIDS Information Line
332-AIDS
V/T.D.D.

This ad paid for by Teens for AIDS Prevention, a project of the Center for Population Options.